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ABSTRACT

After discussing school climate and the differences between school climate and school culture, this document lists numerous components and determinants of school climate as identified in related literature. A description of school culture from "Caught in the Middle," a report developed by the Middle Grades Program Quality Review Task Force and the California Department of Education, is given. Next, the importance of student-centered educational philosophy and practice in the development of a positive school climate is discussed, and factors such as basic human needs, the physical surroundings of the school, and school personality that should be considered when creating a positive and productive school climate are explored. The roles of teachers and principals are discussed with emphasis on leadership and the principals' leadership behavior. (11 references) (CLA)

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DEFINING AN EFFECTIVE CLIMATE

FOR A

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DEFINING AN EFFECTIVE CLIMATE FOR A MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL

by

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"School climate" is not easy to define. Peter Strodl calls it "the organizational counterpart of personality. In a manner of speaking, organizations have personalities, too. If we walk into a school building, we immediately have a feeling about the place as a happy place, or a serious place." (p.2)

We may indeed find it easy to sense the mood of a place as we enter, but on what qualities do we base our feelings? Is it the expressions on people's faces? their body language? the wording of signs and posters? the attractiveness of the building itself? Unless we can pinpoint the critical factors that create the "mood" or "climate" of a school, how can we hope to affect that climate for the better?

Caught in the Middle recognized the elusiveness of the "school climate" concept:

> Terms such as "ethos," "ambiance," "climate," "culture," and "the way we do things around here" describe subtle but nevertheless definable realities that have the potential to affect student attitudes significantly about themselves, their educational values, and their academic achievement. (p.81)

General definitions of school climate usually read something like this:

> An effective school climate is a positive attitude on the part of the entire staff and student body exhibited through their overt behavior that creates a warm, orderly learning environment. (Licata, p.1)

"Orderly" environment (often called "safe and orderly") is one of the key climate factors revealed by the effective schools research. "Warm" and "positive" are adjectives that relate to productive human relationships. They are particularly important

to the middle level education philosophy, which stresses young adolescents' need for acceptance, respect, and self-esteem.

The above definition centers on human attitudes and relationships. This is sometimes called "culture," referring as it does to values, traditions, behavior standards (spoken and unspoken), and a collective sense of "mission."

In its work toward middle level reform, the Regional Networks of Foundation and Partnership Schools make an interesting distinction between school culture and school climate:

> School culture has to do with traditional patterns of knowledge, beliefs, and values which serve as the basis for policy decisions, organizational practices, and human relationships in schools. These can range from traditional, even archaic, patterns to those which are contemporary and innovative. On the other hand, school climate relates to issues associated with the emotional health of individuals and the organizational health of the school as an institution.
>
> It is possible to have a positive school climate while having a school culture which is unresponsive to the most effective educational policies and practices. (p.14)

Thus, in the Networks' definition, a middle level school needs both a "climate" of positive relationships and a "culture" of beliefs and behavior that fosters excellence in education.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT SCHOOL CLIMATE

Educators differ in their opinions about the factors that determine or affect a school's climate. All stress attitudinal factors, but some add organizational issues and even the physical environment. In their guidebook on measuring school climate, Cognetta, Malvetti, and Wilson review the climate components

defined in four different publications, demonstrating how differently these factors are viewed. These four publications summarize the main components of school climate as:

1) Madoff and Genova, 1980: Relationships, Personal Development, Organization

2) Gillespie et al., 1979: Physical Environment, Rules, Attitudes, Decisionmaking Behaviors

3) Anderson, 1982: Ecology, Milieu, Social System, Culture

4) Fox et al., 1974: Respect, Trust, High Morale, Opportunities for Input, Continuous Academic and Social Growth, Cohesiveness, School Renewal, Caring. (pp.9-11)

Howard, Howell, and Brainard have also created a guidebook on school climate improvement. They outline 18 determinants of school climate, in three categories: program, process, and materials:

Program Determinants
1. Opportunities for active learning
2. Individualized performance expectations
3. Varied learning environments
4. Flexible curriculum and extracurricular activities
5. Support and structure appropriate to the learner's maturity
6. Rules cooperatively determined
7. Varied reward systems

Process Determinants
8. Problem-solving ability
9. Improvement of school goals
10. Identifying and working with conflicts
11. Effective communications
12. Involvement in decision making
13. Autonomy with accountability
14. Effective teaching-learning strategies
15. Ability to plan for the future

Material Determinants
16. Adequate resources
17. Supportive and efficient logistical system
18. Suitability of school plant (pp.9-11)

The "Quality Criteria," developed out of *Caught in the Middle* by the Middle Grades Program Quality Review Task Force and the California State Department of Education, also stress attitudinal or emotional factors, but add some environmental or programmatic issues.

What follows is a selection of descriptive sentences on school culture from the "Quality Criteria." Even pulled from their narrative context, they may help create a clearer image of an effective school climate:

> Students in the middle grades should be engaged in a lively, playful, exploratory encounter with a horizon-expanding curriculum and a faculty who loves teaching it and who are committed to the successful development of each student.
>
> A student-centered philosophy permeates the culture of the middle grades. Administrators, teachers, other staff members, and parents are committed to providing a program in which all students experience daily excellence in curriculum and instructional practices...
>
> Teachers believe that they can and do make a difference in the lives of their students, and they reach out to them with energy, excitement, respect, and creativity.
>
> There are rewards, recognition, and incentives for all expressions of student excellence...
>
> A positive school spirit is evident throughout the school. Students are proud of their school and enthusiastic about the school programs. They like being at school and feel valued by their teachers, the administrators, and other staff members.
>
> Teachers are encouraged to be innovative....[They] work together to plan an instructional program that challenges each student to learn while recognizing the specific developmental requirements of these students in transition.
>
> The culture of the middle grades reflects total staff commitment to academics, the study skills and habits which support them, and a pervasive sense of caring about each student's needs and goals.

> Students feel secure at school, They display positive values and attitudes toward themselves and others. The school buildings and campus are clean, well cared for, and free of any evidence of graffiti or vandalism. (pp.IV-27 to IV-28)

STUDENT-CENTEREDNESS: THE KEY TO MIDDLE LEVEL PHILOSOPHY AND CLIMATE

The central tenet of middle level philosophy is that all practice grows out of student needs. The California report, *Caught in the Middle*, reflects this in its recommendation on school culture: "Every middle grade student should experience a positive school culture which reflects a strong, student-centered educational philosophy." (p.80)

The Middle Grades Assessment Program was developed in 1981, by the Center for Early Adolescence, to meld research on adolescent development, effective schools, and educational change into a self-assessment and school improvement plan. In describing the Assessment Program, Dorman, Lipsitz, and Verner state: "To design environments that encourage healthy adolescent learning and growth, educators must take into account the seven interrelated developmental needs of young adolescents." They then list these needs and suggest ways schools can respond. The seven needs are: diversity, self-exploration and self-definition, meaningful participation in their schools and communities, positive social interaction with peers and adults, physical activity, competence and achievement, structure and clear limits. (p.46)

All of these needs--physical, emotional, social, and intellectual--have been discussed repeatedly throughout this

monograph series. They are the basis for the key programmatic features of middle level education. Implementing these key features should go a long way toward fostering a positive school climate. For example, implementing heterogeneous core courses, exploratory and elective classes, and study skills programs for all students should address students' need for diversity and self-exploration, while communicating high academic expectations to all students; developing teacher advisor programs should enhance positive social interactions and demonstrate concern and caring by adults; expanding cocurricular programs should provide new rewards and recognition to students and should expand the sense of meaningful participation, belonging, and "playfulness" that is part of middle grade learning.

CREATING A POSITIVE AND PRODUCTIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

A constant theme throughout this monograph series is that the key programmatic features of middle level education should be tailored by each school to meet the needs of its particular students. This is also true for climate improvement efforts. Studies of effective schools demonstrate that there is ample room for real individuality in creating a good school climate. This is one place where the stricture against "reinventing the wheel" does not seem to apply. Excellent schools seem to create unique "personalities" in quite different ways.

Norm Fruchter examined four effective inner city middle/junior high schools in 1984-85. He found that they had widely different plants, leadership styles, and program emphases,

ranging from the very traditional to the highly innovative. Each had developed effective programs to meet very specific needs. Fruchter makes the point that it is not so much the content of their programs, but the fact that they worked to design special programs, believed in them, and kept improving them:

> These specific practices are not innovations unique to these four schools; each has probably been implemented in schools throughout the country. Nor are these practices a recipe for school success; in these four schools they are embedded within an overall environment which has proven consistently rewarding for teachers and students.
>
> These schools are neither idiosyncratic nor miraculous institutions; instead, principals and staffs in these schools have shaped the everyday processes of administration, curriculum and teaching, guidance and discipline into an overall school environment which encourages effectiveness. (Fruchter, pp.36-37)

Cognetta, Malvetti, and Wilson agree that each school must interpret the meaning of school climate for itself. Each must ask such questions as:

> What do *we* mean when we say school climate?
>
> Can our definition be validated by our various audiences: staff, students, parents, and community?
>
> What components make up our climate: social/personal, organization, physical?
>
> How do these components rank as elements that are (1) important and (2) something that we can affect? (pp.18-23)

Like Howard, Howell, and Brainard, Cognetta *et al.* offer a process and tools for improving school climate: creating an assessment team, gathering and evaluating data, and planning change.

In the general process of school improvement, addressing climate and discipline issues first can have a tremendous impact. Improving climate improves attitudes, makes school a nicer place to be, and can empower and encourage people to make further change.

The difficulty lies in the fact that most "school climate" is in the mind: it is a function of the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals. We cannot order people to change their minds. But attitudes can be strongly affected by even small changes in programs, rules, or methods. Many climate issues can be addressed inexpensively, as in the old saying, "Little things mean a lot."

Howard, Howell, and Brainard assert that a wholesome school climate must address all of the basic human needs of students and staff: physiological needs (heat, light, etc.), safety needs, acceptance and friendship needs, achievement and recognition needs, and needs to maximize one's potential. (p.6) According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, physiological and safety needs must be met before an individual is free to actualize emotional and intellectual needs. Thus, the adequacy and safety of a school may be important first issues. This was the case in one New York City intermediate school, where students could not be comfortable because they were frequently harassed by older youth as they walked to and from school. The principal met with local merchants to set up a "safe refuge" plan, in which students could seek protection in designated shops. The program was simple, yet it made students feel safe and brought community members into a

meaningful relationship with the school. (Fruchter, p.22)

Another New York City intermediate school defined a different "security" issue: in this school, which included fifth graders, there was concern that these children were too young to cope with the demands of the school and with the older students. The principal made himself the "dean" of the fifth grade and grouped the fifth grade classrooms around his office. He took it upon himself to orient, lead, and protect the youngest students, modeling the behavior he expected of older students and easing the fears of fifth graders and their parents. (Fruchter, p.18)

We know that physical surroundings can affect mood. Modern, well-equipped facilities add wonderfully to the ambiance of a school, but less well-endowed schools have found that much can be accomplished with some paint and a student-run "campus beautification" campaign. It has generally been found that once students become involved in the work of clean-up, they feel more ownership of the building and discourage their peers from "messing up" their handiwork.

There are many other examples of physical or programmatic changes--from small things ("secret pals," school T-shirts, spirit days, citizenship awards, birthday celebrations) to major organizational overhauls, such as a house plan--that can greatly affect student attitudes and enthusiasm for their school.

Yet we must use caution in deciding how to translate an attitude or feeling into a practice. The message we think we are sending is not always the message that is received. A specific attitude may not correlate with a specific behavior, even when a

connection between them seems quite "logical." For example, Huddle found that teachers in exemplary secondary schools held high expectations for student performance, yet these high expectations did not translate into stricter course or graduation requirements, as we might expect them to do. Successful secondary schools did not have higher academic requirements than other schools, just higher teacher expectations. (Huddle, p.68)

We must also remember that each person perceives the environment differently. Psychologist Leo Buscaglia lectures on the subject of love and relationships, often using stories about his own childhood. He tells how--after one such speech extolling his parents for their warmth, love, and acceptance--his oldest brother asked, "Did we grow up with the same parents?"

Varying perceptions are active at school, too. Peter Strodl surveyed 804 students of different ethnic backgrounds (Black, White, Hispanic, Oriental, and Other) in five urban middle schools, using the Elementary and Secondary School Environment Index. He found that perceptions of organizational climate differed in very complex ways, depending on the student's socioeconomic and ethnic status. (Academic ability level was not nearly so important a factor in these variations.) The ethnic differences he discovered are far too complex and subtle to be reduced into a recipe for creating a happy multiethnic middle school, but they do highlight the need for educators to check the perceptions of their particular students, instead of operating on the basis of assumptions.

Strodl did have one unambiguous conclusion:

> Together with this, however, teachers appear to be the critical linkage in the perceptions of the students. . . . The strongest aspect of these findings is that the teachers have a real leadership role to play in causing greater social cohesiveness in multiethnic middle schools. In no way does this idea interfere with the role of school administrators. (p.15)

ROLES OF TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS: CONFLICT OR COOPERATION?

It is because of teachers' impact on students that teacher empowerment is such a critical feature of middle level education. Effective, empowered, contented, valued teachers have the positive energy needed to care about students and work hard for them; dispirited, harassed, deprived teachers do not. From his review of research on successful secondary schools, one of Eugene Huddle's conclusions was that: "A major theme in successful secondary schools is recognition of teacher accomplishments both from the principal and from each other. . . . Highly motivated and energized teachers are a precondition to positive student-teacher relationships." (pp.66-67)

Teacher efficacy is part of the effective schools research, and so is strong instructional leadership. With the movement toward school-based management, some educators fear a conflict: how can strong leadership by the principal co-exist with teacher empowerment and a collegial ethos? Can the principal lead if all the teachers are leading, too?

One very small study may suggest an answer. In examining the principal-faculty dynamics at six urban middle schools, Osterman found that principals who both led (e.g., helped teachers,

provided vision) *and* let teachers exercise leadership, had satisfied faculties that functioned collegially. At schools where principals either (1) didn't lead at all or (2) led to the point of domination, teacher morale was far lower and staff relationships more negative. (pp.10-19)

THE PRINCIPAL'S LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

A leader fosters change both by advancing new goals and procedures and by setting a personal example. Case studies have found that effective leadership styles vary greatly. For example, the four principals in Fruchter's study included a traditional moral exemplar--the kind of principal who *is* the school--and a "spontaneous" consensus-maker, whose open, participative style included management by walking around and daily problem-solving forums. (pp.19-21) Both principals displayed the behavior they expected of others and knew how to get the best out of people, but they did it in their own ways. As Huddle concludes: "no one leadership style is dominant. What matters most is the fit between the style and the school environment." (p.66)

Again, we return to a constant theme of middle level education: when dealing with human beings, there is no recipe, no "right way"; one must be innovative and flexible. Like the core philosophy of middle level education, school climate focuses on the needs of young adolescents. Indeed, an effective middle level school climate may be seen as the culmination of the middle level philosophy, expressed through its key programmatic features, such as heterogeneous core courses, exploratory and cocurricular

programs, and student advisory. But each school must build these programs in its own way to address the particular needs of its student body.

Ideally, each middle level school shares the vision of *student-centeredness* and expresses it in a warm, positive atmosphere that is felt by each person who steps onto campus. But the details that create this mood may differ greatly from one school to the next. Each will have its own "personality." As one assistant principal put it:

> Experience has taught me that there is no magic formula that creates this climate overnight. It takes strong leadership on the part of the administration to act as role models, set a climate expectation level, and be willing to take the necessary risks to improve; innovative programs that recognize the self worth of every student; a teaching and support staff that is cooperative, caring, and committed to affective education; and lastly, a philosophy that states that kids are very important people. (Licata, p.1)

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